

The Vietnam War – The Gulf of Tonkin

BLUF: On 2 August 1964, three North Vietnamese torpedo boats were patrolling near an intelligence operation by the *USS Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam. The *Maddox* fired three warning shots at the boats, who returned fire with torpedoes and machine gunfire. A second incident was reported on 4 August, though the Vietnamese boats turned out to be "ghost images" on the radar. President Johnson used the events to ask Congress for a resolution that would give him broad powers to expand military action in Vietnam. The *Gulf of Tonkin Resolution* was passed with a 416-0 vote in the House and an 88-2 vote in the Senate on 10 August 1964.

GENERAL STORY: With the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passage, President Johnson launched U.S. offensive operations in Vietnam. When the resolution was passed in 1964, about 23,000 American troops in Vietnam mostly served in an advisory capacity. By the end of 1965, 184,300 American servicemen were serving in Vietnam. Without the resolution, it would have been more challenging for President Johnson to intensify American efforts in Vietnam so rapidly.

The *Gulf of Tonkin Resolution* is one of the most controversial Acts of Congress in U.S. history. Troop levels in Vietnam reached 536,100 Americans by 1968. The actual events that precipitated the resolution have been called into question by historians since 1967. The biggest concern with the act is that Congress surrendered their Constitutional "war powers" to the Executive branch. The resolution was amended with the *War Powers Resolution of 1973*, but still, the President has war-making powers that were not granted originally by the *United States Constitution*.

MARINE STORY: The Marine Corps began offensive operations in Van Tuong, Vietnam, on 18 August 1965 with *Operation Starlite*, known initially as *Operation Satellite*. In total, 5,500 Marines participated from five Marine battalions, incurring 248 Marine casualties during the operation. During the campaign, an important lesson learned was that the daily allotment of two gallons of water per man was inadequate in Vietnam's heat. This operation was the beginning of a full-scale presence for the Marine Corps until 1971.

QUESTIONS

1. How did the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution change America's involvement in Vietnam?
2. Why is the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution so controversial?
3. In what way did the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution change the Marine Corps effort in Vietnam?

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